

# TRAVEL

## Ocala National Forest: Unique and nearby

BY ROBERT HILLIARD  
Special to Florida Weekly

We tend to play the reluctant tourist in the place where we live and work. Busy with jobs and family, we usually take time to explore our own environment only when out-of-town visitors expect us to serve as their local tour guides. Years ago, when I was leaving New York City after living and working there for some years, I took one of the ubiquitous boat trips around Manhattan Island, not expecting anything more than a fulfillment of some vague obligation to something I should finally do. After a half-day of seeing many sights that I hadn't even known existed, I lamented not having taken that boat trip 10 years earlier.

Now, after many years as a part-time and recently mostly full-time resident of Florida, I'm trying not to repeat that pattern. Particularly with the sinking economy, frugality suggests an exploration on the roads of Florida rather than a road trip to New Mexico or Arizona or Colorado.

One such trip took us north from Lee County to the Ocala National Forest. Most of us think of Ocala only in connection with the Silver Spring entertainment complex, including the glass-bottom boats and bottomless glasses of orange juice. I hadn't been to that area since our World War II training company at Camp Blanding took a day's R&R to Silver Spring.

Ocala National Forest is a real forest — actually, a number of connected forests with lakes, hiking trails, biking trails, off-road vehicle trails, horseback riding trails, canoeing, campgrounds, and private cabins for rent at the rims of a number of the lakes. Using the Internet, we found and made reservations for a weekend in a cabin by a lake.

The quickest way to the Ocala National forest is Interstate 75 north to route 40 east. However, depending on whether your destination is the northern or the southern and eastern area of the forest, you may wish to take Interstate 4 east from Tampa to U.S. 19



Rental cabins at Ocala National Forest. Overnight rates for two range from about \$65 up.



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north, and enter the forest from the south rather than from the northwest. Because the roads within the parameters of Ocala National Forest are extremely tricky, sometimes meandering through suburban complexes and then through rural areas, get a specific Map Quest routing or detailed directions from the manager of the tent, RV, or cabin site you've reserved if you're making more than a day trip. Despite what we thought were good directions, it took us almost an hour of additional time wandering the roads of the forest before we finally found, with the help of a passing motorist, our destination.

There are many options, depending on whether you are camping, renting a cabin or RVing. The Juniper Springs recreation area in Ocala National Forest is one of the oldest on the east coast, built during the 1930s economic depression by the Civilian Conservation Corps. Like most of the areas in the forest, offering trails through semi-tropical vegetation, it is federally protected

and with a self-guided interpretive section. If you are not using the camping area, which accommodates trailers and motor homes as well as tents, you can, as a day visitor, use the swimming pool, picnicking area, hiking trails, and canoe rental from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. (or until dusk in non-summer hours). The 7-mile canoe run on Juniper Creek — you can bring your own canoe, if you wish — provides a view of forest wildlife and many different botanical species.

One weekend won't be enough to introduce you to Florida's own version of the Maine woods or the Kentucky forests. If you decide to go, look at a map at [www.OcalaNationalForest.gov](http://www.OcalaNationalForest.gov) and then a description of the many recreation areas to decide which ones interest you most: Lake Eaton Campground, which features a boat ramp and fishing pier; Mill Dam Recreation Area, which was a 1930s CCC camp, with its 300-foot sandy swimming beach; Lake Delaney Campground and Recreation Area, surrounded by trees and which wel-

comes ATVs, motorcycles and horses; Alexander Springs Recreation Area, where there is evidence of human habitation dating back to 1000 A.D. and which features a freshwater spring and snorkeling; Fore Lake Campground with its lush vegetation; and Hopkins Prairie Recreation Area and Campground, with scrub pine surrounding a fishing lake where reputedly the largest bass in Florida was caught. Nominal fees for camping and for day use apply.

If you're interested in the OHV (off-road vehicles) trails, there's the Ocala north system of 125 miles near Delaney West, and the Wandering Wiregrass system of 16 miles near the junction of state road 19 and county road 445. There is also a special motorcycle loop. For horseback riders, three trails starting at State Road 19 and Lake Dorr Road at the southern tip of the forest total 100 miles.

And if you get tired of nature, there's always the Silver Spring glass-bottomed boats and amusement park rides.

If you don't wish to stay in one of the official recreation or campground sites, look on a Florida map for a city or town closest to the recreation area you'd like to be near, Google it and you'll find information for cabin rentals, inns and B&Bs. Overnight rates for two range from about \$65 up. ■

### If you go

**>>What:** Ocala National Forest  
**>>Where:** Major visitor centers are the Pittman Visitor Center on 45621 State Road 19 at Altoona, (352) 669-7495; the Seminole Ranger District center, 40929 SR 19 at Umatilla, (352) 669-3153; and the Lake George Ranger District center, 17147 E. Highway 40 near Silver Springs.  
**>>Hints:** Try to stop at one of the centers on your way in for helpful maps and literature. For OHV information, try [www.fs.fed.us/r8/Florida](http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/Florida) or (352) 625-2520. For additional information about the Ocala National Forest and all of its facilities, log on to [www.fs.us/r8/florida/about/index\\_oca.shtml](http://www.fs.us/r8/florida/about/index_oca.shtml).

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